‘A town is a country’: Dey

Khwana (Khokana)
Dong Hall (1968)

As someone born in Newa society, in an interior part of a historical Newa settlement and raised speaking our native language Nepal Bhasa, there is a term we use quite often. The term sometimes means a town, it sometimes means an interior part of town, sometimes mean a district, and sometimes mean a country. ‘*Dey*‘ or ‘*Desha*‘ contains multiple use in understanding an administrative region. When we dig up into the semantics of this term and what shapes Newa society to use a single terminology for assigning multiple subjects takes us to an interesting philosophical construct.

There are about a hundred of Newa towns within the region of Nepal Mandala. In the Nepa Valley itself lie 50 such towns. These towns were built with a sense

of autonomy. When a town was established, it was well planned from various aspects making them self-sufficient. Except for salt and gold, everything was self-sufficient in a town.

Each town had its own festivals and *jatra*s which made it culturally autonomous. The complex system of water management was brought to every town constructing its own water sources as *Lohan Hiti*, *Jarun Hiti* and *Toon* (well), which made it self-sufficient for water. The towns were built in high land surrounded by agricultural land all around it, which produced enough food for its inhabitants. Every town had people pursuing almost all sorts of occupations necessary for their livelihood. Oil producers, farmers, priests, cleaners, barbers, weavers, florists, milkmen, wood carvers, stone carvers, metal-smiths, traders and so on. Every town consisted of its own state power called '*Thakun Laani*' and '*Thakun Juju*' the king and queen of the town. As their residence, the *Laaykoo* (palace) was built in every town. From what can be gathered from the remains, the town *Laaykoo* were not large as the city-states, but it existed at the central part of the town.

The pattern of Newa urban development can be traced to the modern concept of Satellite City. The phrase "*Thayaa Thaay Desye*" थःया थाय् देसय् (in our own desh) is commonly used to refer to one's own town.

While in the historical Newa context, a single town had characteristics features of a country in itself, it was marked by certain boundaries called '*Dhwaakha*' (gate). As population grew, people had to move out of the boundary and build houses in what wasn't a human settlement area. These houses are usually termed as '*Bekha*', which means 'not in the row'. In Nepal Bhasa conversations, '*Deshe dune*' (inside the country) and '*Deshan pine*' (outside the country) are often heard. Here, '*Dey*' has been assigned a meaning of 'inside the historical town premises'. Any individual who had a house on the other side of the boundary, would say '*Desye Wonegu*' (going to desh) when they would enter the town. A common phrase was '*Desey dune du*' (is within the boundaries of the desh), when people living in sprawled new towns wanted to refer to something inside those historical towns.

While every town was a *'Dey'* in itself, there were larger kingdoms that ruled on it. Nepal Mandala (then, Kingdom of Nepal) practiced classical federalism. There were four major kingdoms, i.e. *Yén Dey*, *Yala Dey*, *Khwopa Dey* and *Dwalkha Dey*. While they are Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur and

Dolakha respectively, these boundaries of historical kingdoms cannot be confused with current boundaries of districts, as they are different. Viz *Yala Dey* was centrally ruled from the *Yala Laaykoo* (Patan Durbar), meanwhile every town in the *Yala Dey* still had their own autonomy. The *Laaykoo* of these kingdoms were larger than the town ones and each of them has its own *Talju Bhawani*.

The area Nepal Mandala, which was a sovereign Newa kingdom before Gorkhali invasion in 19th century, is also referred as '*Dey*'. So basically if you are going from Nepa Valley to the Pokhara Valley, you are leaving your '*Dey'*. A travel to Gosainkunda means to go ' *Taapley* '. When you leave these boundaries of historically Newa kingdoms, it is refereed as '*Taapley*'. While there is not exact translation of what it means '*taapley wonegu*' gives a similar meaning like 'going abroad'.

At the end, the current geo-political entity Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal is also the '*Dey*' : Nepa Dey. Linguistic Determinism and Linguistic Relativity in Nepal Bhasa is shaped by the cultural and political context of Newa Society.

There isn't an exact translation of the word 'city' in Nepal Bhasa. Newa linguists argue that Nepal Bhasa did not have word like city and village because there was no such sort of distinction. The contemporary Nepal Bhasa vocabulary has a word called '*Gaan*' which means a village. While it is a prominent term to be used, linguists argue that this term is a vulgarization of Khas term '*gaaun*'. When local level bodies were declared for the first time in Nepal, *(Nepal was divided into 35 administrative districts until 1963)* some of these towns got to be municipality while many of them were declared as Village Development Committee. It is said that '*Gaan*' (village) is a concept that emerged later. There still isn't an exact term for city in Nepal Bhasa, and the Khas term '*sahar*' is used.

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